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ABSTRACT

Two lessons from a graduate general education course were presented in a live-television format. One group of students was placed in the studio with the instructor and another group in a classroom away from the studio. The classroom was equipped with a monitor enabling students to watch all the action, a telephone to allow them to call in with questions, and a microphone was used to ensure that their questions could be heard by both groups. The first lesson was a student activity demonstrating social differences, and it included music, visuals, and handouts. A facilitator was on hand in the "distant" classroom to pass out materials. The instructor was allowed three much-needed rehearsals in the studio before conducting the class. The second lesson included a video clip of a news documentary and a discussion between studio and distant classroom students. Based on the results, it was concluded that the television medium is an exciting, viable distance education format that can promote creative teaching and enhance distant learning. (11 references). (DB)

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Creative Teaching on Television

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Abstract

Distance learning is one way to present a course to students miles away without the instructor having to travel for hours. This article focuses on the steps it takes to prepare a class for television and the variety of activities that can be implemented in the lesson to help meet the individual needs of students. The television medium enabled a graduate class in education to be presented in an exciting format complete with visual and sound effects.

Creative Teaching on Television

Introduction

"Live from Keyser Hall; it's Education 503, Foundations of Education like never before."

For two weeks Education 503 slipped into the world of Hollywood. Lesson plans became television scripts, the chalkboard became computer generated graphics and the instructor could have auditioned for a slot on prime time TV. Education--Hollywood style. The lights, cameras and microphones were part of an experiment in distance education.

How can a course be taught to students miles away without the instructor traveling in a car for hours and repeating the same course four times a week? One alternative being used today would be to videotape the instructor teaching the course and send the tapes through the United States mail, along with handouts and text references. Cost Effective? Probably. Boring? Probably. Crane (1985) found that students who watch videotapes as courses make comments like these:

"Needed more instructor contact."

"Spoiled by having it on TV. . . kept putting it off and got behind."

"Need to be in class with the instructor. . .no self-discipline."

(pp.12-13)

The dropout rate in one study reached as high as fifty percent (Pekich, 1979). Students were obviously dissatisfied with the style of delivery. Even researchers note inherent problems exist in the use of pretaped video cassettes for instructional purposes. Because of the tape presentation, no one-to-one contact is maintained between the student and instructor (Weber, 1984). Without an instructor in the room, no direct feedback is given about the presented lesson. Students do not have the opportunity to ask questions during the videotape presentation. Students may feel alienated as a result of the videotape element (Weber, 1984). Alienation may cause the student to become frustrated with the course and leave.

One study shows telecourses should be live and include a live student audience. Surveys of students show they feel the video classroom is more successful with an audience. The students ask pertinent questions during the live presentation of the lesson and a natural flow of classroom instruction exists. This live concept is the alternative to pre-scripted telecourses (Ainsworth, 1986).

What happened in Keyser Hall for two nights was completely different from a formal pre-taped telecourse. These lessons were live and interactive. One group of students was placed in the studio with the instructor and another group in a classroom away from the studio. The classroom was equipped with a monitor to watch all of the action, a phone to call in with a question, and a microphone to make sure students were heard loud and clear. The result was distance learning, a new alternative to the old tradition of teaching.

Preparation

Everyone knows all about the secrets of television. For the last fifty years living rooms across America have been host to scores of shows. Students and teachers are familiar enough with the medium, but this time the message was going to be different. Instead of jokes and plots seen in nightly sitcoms, Education 503 would be theories and problems of modern day instruction.

In an effort to understand the technology behind distance learning so it could be used its best potential, self-education had to occur. Andrew Weber (1984), an educational video researcher, notes teachers do not have a full understanding of today's modern equipment. When the equipment needs to be used and the person in charge does not know how, serious problems result. How the wiring works, how the television signal travels, how to compose an effective picture and about an hour's worth of other questions were put on the table; in the process, a clear picture was established of how to use television to educate. Once the foundation was laid, the door to developing a creative lesson kept opening wider and wider.

The world's best directors say people love to escape to the movies. For two hours a person can become involved in a plot completely different than their own life (Archer, 1986). The techniques that capture a viewer's attention at the movies are called "spectacle." This refers to the lights, colors, movement, audio, and anything else that brings a viewer into the scene. Education 503 had to have spectacle or the data suggests students would get bored and drift

away from the educational focus. When people watch TV, they want to see action. Long time TV teachers suggest the lesson delivered on the air waves should be tested against these questions:

1. Does the delivery capture the student's attention?
2. Does the delivery lead to a logical conclusion?
3. Does the delivery hold the interest of the student?
4. Do the visuals work to add to the lesson?

(Wyman, 1961, p.42)

These questions were applied to the lesson objectives and measured.

Even the teacher chosen to be a new TV teacher should possess basic qualities, according to old-timers in the business. Pekich (1979) suggests:

> An instructor must be able to communicate effectively through a camera. . . . The instructor must be able to think visually. . . . The instructor must have a thorough background in his or her content area. . . . The instructor must be creative and be able to work well with others. . . . The instructor must be able to recognize his or her own limitations as a video teacher. . . . The instructor must be able to accept and give constructive criticism. . . . The instructor must be flexible and be willing to rework on request. (pp. 20-25)

Other researchers emphasize presentation of ideas, flow of words, timing, pauses, pitch of voice, body movement and captivating audio and visual aids (Nevins, 1986). All in all, no small order to fill.

In an effort to make Education 503 stand out, an exercise was chosen that made the most of the television medium and, more importantly, worked well with the planned lesson. The topic for the first class was social class and social differences. Students explored the issues as they pertained to the sociological foundations of education. A group exercise called "Terra Island" was used to demonstrate how each culture has valuable qualities. The exercise evolves from a cruise that ends in disaster. A shipwreck leaves the passengers (the students) stranded on an island. Survival was the ultimate goal. The instructor established three groups of stranded victims. One group had most of the natural resources available on the island, the second group had some natural resources and the third group had nothing. Each group had to compromise with the other groups if they all wanted to stay alive.

The exercise included music, visuals and handouts. Most television programs include music. Music is considered a primal motivator (Archer, 1986). Horror scenes have strong Beethoven-like crescendos and love scenes have soft romantic mixes. The Beach Boys were a perfect match for the cruise and, for the shipwreck, "Gilligan's Island" theme music was a natural. The students had prior knowledge of these tunes and could relate to the scenerio on a musical cue. The next element television has to offer is pictures. Pictures help pull the viewer into the scene. Palm trees, blue waters and white sand were used to establish a tropical island atmosphere. A local travel agency supplied the glossy photos. The handouts that went along with

the exercises became a dilemma. Who would pass them out? Who would answer small, simple questions like, "How do we contact the other groups?" The results of an Annenberg study showed an active facilitator was beneficial in the distant classroom when an instructor would not be present (Hoy, 1985). A facilitator was scheduled to attend to the students watching the lesson in the classroom away from the studio. The facilitator was briefed on the exercise, "Terra Island," and made familiar with the basics of the lesson.

Showtime? Not quite.

The instructor needed some drills. She above all had to be self-confident during her delivery. If she was nervous about delivering the lesson in the new environment, the students would be sure to be extra nervous. Reseach shows too much rehearsal produces a delivery that looks staged and unnatural (White, 1984). Not at all what was needed for Education 503; the class needed to be spontaneous and lively. The teacher was brought into the studio three times before the actual taping. The first time was a disaster. The instructor faced the shock of seeing herself on camera (ten pounds heavier) and hearing the sounds of her own voice. She never knew she looked or sounded "like that!" The second rehearsal showed improvement, and the third rehearsal was even better. During these rehearsals, the instructor spent no longer than twenty-five minutes in the studio and did not discuss any of the information to be used during the actual distance learning session.

The Presentation

The night of the presentation opened to wary students obviously distracted by the lights, cameras and microphones; even the instructor was on edge. The first fifteen minutes seemed to last an hour, but then time started to move and students started to participate. Education 503 was on the air, live.

The use of television tended to lend itself to a well-organized lesson. The class opened with a brief explanation by the instructor about how the next three hours would pass. The students in the remote classroom were given instructions on how to contact the studio with their questions during the course of the lesson. Time was given at this initial point to all groups to ask questions concerning the presentation of the night's lesson. This whole process lasted less than five minutes and appeared to put both the studio and the classroom groups more at ease.

Immediately after this discussion, the instructor went right into the lesson. After a brief review of socializing agents, objectives were shown on the screen as the instructor ad-libbed briefly about each one. Students took notes and asked questions.

Visuals were used to pull the students into an opening discussion on social class and educational equality. Pictures of a skilled laborer at work and later reading with his children assisted in identifying the specific social groups being referenced during the lesson. The pictures gave students a better perspective of the situation being discussed. One of the students in the studio, a South American, gave

his testimony of social class and differential treatment which dramatically changed the course of the discussion. His comments would not have normally been available to the distant classroom; tonight, via television it was.

At this time, new terminology and definitions that specifically related to the lesson were introduced. When referenced by the instructor, these new words were shown on the screen with working definitions.

Students took short breaks after approximately forty minutes. This time frame was derived from using the results of research that showed the average and most productive length of telecourses ranges between thirty minutes and forty five minutes (Weber, 1984).

When the time came to simulate the "Terra Island" cruise, it was an obvious success. Students slipped on sunglasses and leis, really getting into the part. Their fingers snapped and feet tapped to the Beach Boys tune, and when the Gilligan's Island theme music came up, no explanations were necessary, the students knew exactly what had happened. The success of the group exercise appeared to derive in its delivery via television. Even in later class discussions and reviews, the "Terra Island" exercise dominated their conversations.

The Aftermath

The next week's lesson went much more smoothly. The studio crew was more familiar with the process of distance learning and the students in the studio seemed more at ease then the previous week.

During the second lesson, the value of the television medium was confirmed again, when a video clip of a 1970 ABC news documentary was shown to all groups. When the clip finished, a round table discussion lasted for well over fifteen minutes between students in the studio and the students in the classroom. The instructor was also able to control and lead the discussion instead of having to fool with a video cassette recorder. The exercise was hands-free for her. The entire television lesson left the teacher completely free to work the classroom without having to write on the chalkboard, thread filmstrips, or suffer from other distractions.

Since the completion of the distance learning drills, five students who were absent from one of the two lessons presented on television have checked out a recorded copy of the lesson. These tapes were made available as make-up work. In addition to the absentees, other students have used the videotaped copies to review course material. Even the instructor is viewing the tapes to evaluate her teaching method and delivery style.

Conclusion

The television medium allows lessons to be presented in an exciting format that includes visual effects and sound effects. The instructor is able to enhance the lesson with a variety of activities without the hassles and interruptions of setting up and working with audio-visual equipment. Since research has shown students each have a unique learning style (Dunn, Beaudry, & Klavie, 1989; Keefe, 1987),

instructors need a variety of ways to present material. With the capabilities of television, this is possible. Television lends itself to creative teaching.

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